



Limpkin **(*Aramus guarauna*)**

By Robert A. Norman
Illustration by Lizabeth West



Limpkins are fascinating, mostly solitary creatures that can easily be overlooked as they stalk about freshwater marshes and swamps, but they will certainly draw attention with their piercing banshee wails. Its cry is a loud, repeated kree-ow, kra-ow, often heard at dawn, at night and on cloudy days.

A large brown spotted swamp wader with olive legs, intricately patterned with white dots and dashes, an adult limpkin stands about 28 inches tall. This odd wading bird has no close relatives. Its long legs and drooping bill give it an ibis-like aspect, but no ibis is brown with white spots and streaks. Although its flight is somewhat crane-like (smart upward flaps), the limpkin is named for its leg-dangling flight and limping gait. They are considered to be the connecting evolutionary link between cranes and rails.

The limpkin is widespread in the American tropics but only enters the U.S. through Florida, where it can satisfy its dietary requirement of large freshwater apple snails. It is found in open freshwater marshes, along the shores of ponds and lakes, and in wooded swamps along rivers and springs.

The limpkin forages by walking in shallow water in a visual search for snails. They also probe in mud and among vegetation for snails, mussels and sometimes insects, crustaceans, worms, frogs and lizards. The tip of the bill usually curves slightly to the right, which may help in removing snails from their curved shell. Its bill usually has a slight gap just behind the tips of the

mandibles, which may help in carrying and manipulating snails.

Limpkin breeding habits aren't well known. The site for their nest varies; it may be on ground near water, in marsh grass just above water, or in shrubs or trees above or near water up to 20 feet or more in height. The nest is a platform of reeds and grass lined with finer plant material. The eggs, usually in clusters of four to eight, are olive to buff-colored and blotched with brown and gray. Incubation is by both sexes, but the incubation period is not well known. Downy young leave the nest within a day after hatching and follow one or both parents. It's probable that both parents feed the young, although the development of young and the age of young birds at first flight are not well known.

Limpkins were almost hunted to extinction in Florida by the beginning of the 20th century, but with legal protection they are making a fair comeback, a comeback greatly appreciated by outdoor enthusiasts.

Robert A. Norman is a physician and writer from Tampa who loves kayaking and outdoor photography. His favorite Florida rivers for finding limpkins include the Silver, Myakka and Hillsborough.

